

Seven simple steps to effectively staff your coding department

justCoding.com - MAY 27, 2009 —

by Elise Belanger, RHIA

As an HIM director or coding supervisor, I'm sure you've been asked this question: "How many coders do we need to avoid a backlog?" The answer involves a seven-step formula you can apply to calculate staffing needs.

1. Determine how many records your staff members can code per day or week. This may be difficult for the novice director who isn't as familiar with the facility's typical workload or patient volume. However, the total number of inpatient discharges is usually an easy number to obtain from the inpatient census.

Outpatient data can be more challenging to obtain because HIM staff members do not code all outpatient services. First, determine all the outpatient services your facility provides. Then find out whether your own staff members code those services or whether your facility has staff members dedicated to coding the services. Finally, check whether the coders are responsible for all diagnostic and procedural coding.

2. Determine how much abstracting your coders perform. Although abstracting is a vital HIM function, it does slow coders down. Review all of the abstracting to determine whether analysts, instead of coders, can abstract any data. For example, abstracting whether a patient is a smoker is something an analyst can easily do.

3. Consider whether the coders code from paper or electronic records. Although an electronic health record provides easy access to information, it also poses challenges for coders who are beginning to learn new processes and systems. Until staff members are able to navigate the system to find the necessary information to code, they may be less productive.

As an interim step, consider asking the analyst to print certain documents for coders to review. After coding is complete, destroy those printed documents.

4. Identify additional tasks. After reviewing the department's job descriptions, policies, and procedures, ask the coders what additional tasks they perform. Observe them to ensure that they are, in fact, performing these tasks on a regular basis.

If you employ remote coders, compare their responsibilities with those of your on-site coders to ensure that you have a complete picture of the tasks all of your coders perform.

5. Observe and audit your coders. Observation can help identify coders' work habits. These habits can include their speed, use of reference material, review of the record content, and discussions with other coders regarding challenging coding scenarios.

Perform routine, random audits of each coder's work to determine his or her accuracy rate and quality. Assess accuracy and quality using a standardized approach that takes the following into consideration:

- Identification of diagnoses and procedures to code
- Identification of the principal diagnosis
- Correct code assignment

If coders use computer-assisted coding, take technology-related errors into consideration and evaluate the source of all errors.

6. Obtain local and regional productivity averages. The first step in obtaining this information is to call other facilities in your area to conduct a phone survey. Search online for national averages, but make sure you compare apples to apples in terms of productivity for coding versus noncoding functions. Calculate coding productivity as the number of cases coded per hour. With the exception of contract coders, it is very rare that a coder codes for eight hours per day.

7. Put it all together. To calculate your staffing needs, divide the volumes (as determined in step one) by the time it takes to perform each task (as determined in step five). Use data from both new and experienced staff members, as well as those who work at different speeds. This will help you see your staff's range of productivity.

An important point to remember is that there are several other factors at play when it comes to calculating productivity. You'll find that productivity is also affected by

vacancies, illnesses, and vacations. Also, noncoding functions may have more of an effect than you think, since these tasks may consume a considerable amount of time when not properly controlled.

Conclusion

The question of how many coders you need to efficiently and effectively run the department may not be a straightforward one. But to answer it, you need to know your coders' average productivity, as well as your facility's patient volume. Don't forget to factor in noncoding duties and unforeseeable changes (e.g., sickness and vacation).

Editor's note: Elise Belanger, RHIA, has been credentialed since 1975 and has worked in a variety of HIM capacities, including administration, teaching, and consulting. E-mail her at elisejoy@earthlink.net.

This story originally appeared In the April issue of [Medical Records Briefing](#).